

Foreword

I see students from China on a regular basis as I teach in the U.S. When they mention, “what trouble the Tibetans are causing”, it reminds me of a long history. For me, it's a long history that started when I saw David Shever's photographs of Tibetans fleeing torture, economic brutality, prejudice, and the oppression of the general Tibetan population. Of course the average Chinese person I meet today says, “But we helped the Tibetans and they don't appreciate it. We built roads and electric dams.” But they overlook the consistent work of the Chinese regime to intimidate, bomb, censor, disempower, and torture out of memory the vast and rich cultural and political heritage of Tibet. For me, it is a sad contrast, meeting people steeped in propaganda after having seen the evidence, having heard accounts first hand myself. That's what it took to get me interested, first hand accounts and real photos.

I didn't realize it until today though, April 16, 2008, just how urgently China needs to be honest with itself. One of my Chinese students said, “they only torture bad Tibetans”, but one minute later that same student said, “You know, when I was a child, they were doing that all over China, tearing down temples, imprisoning people, killing those who wouldn't be allegiant, and destroying our own culture in 1966... but that was then, and it doesn't happen now.” I told my student about the book you are about to read and the stream of Tibetan babies that are spirited across the border along with hope, to Dharamsala, India. I told my student of the poignant tales of people fleeing cultural annihilation, of torture, of bullying, and of prejudice in the extreme. My student's response was not to deny this. Instead, my student said something honest and self-aware: “But you know, when I go back to China, we can't talk about this. We have to keep our heads down.”

The new dispersion of Chinese students across the free world is a new hope for me, for the next generation of Chinese politics. As they integrate back into their homeland, let's hope that they infuse ideas of openness, of tolerance, of power in diversity, and of autonomy as a sound basis of meaningful friendship. Yet without books like the one you hold in your hand, this new generation of the Chinese intelligentsia, these world travelers, will be only propagating the myths of their own leaders, and will not have cause to consider critically the evidence of what has really been happening in Tibet. This book is a jewel, in that it can catch their eye with an earnest gaze from the faces of people who have fled Chinese-controlled Tibet. Starting with that gaze and reading the stories, they can begin to take responsibility for the real human consequences of China's Tibetan policies of the past, and help guide their government to develop a more humane, more just, and more rational path.

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